

A PAINTED WINDOW IN SAINT SOPHIA AT ISTANBUL*

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A mong the papers that belonged to Elias Ashmole (1617–1692) now housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford is a drawing of St. George and the Dragon bearing the superscription: “The draught of St: George, Copied out of a Book in Mr: Jo: Tradescants Closet, wherein are rarely lymned, the windows (ab 1650) of St: Sophia’s Church at Constantinople” (figure). John Tradescant’s “Closet” was a museum of natural and man-made curiosities formed in the early seventeenth century in his house at Lambeth, an establishment popularly known as Tradescant’s Ark,¹ and the book in question was doubtless the one mentioned by Georg Christoph Stirn of Nuremberg who visited the Ark in 1638: “pictures from the church of S. Sophia in Constantinople copied by a Jew into a book,”² and the one described in John Tradescant The Younger’s *Musaeum Tradescantianum* as “A Book of all the Stories in the glasse-windowes of *Sancta Sophia*, lim’d in vellum by a Jew.”³ The information provided by the sketch is of particular interest for otherwise the only information we have concerning the original windows of Saint Sophia are a few references by early travelers. The relevant material has been conveniently brought together by Professor Mango. In 1674, John Covell states: “In ye first windore in ye W. gall. (coming in on ye S. side) are severall peices of white transparent stone, which I take to be Indian Alabaster”;⁴ probably the same window as the one seen by Guillaume-Joseph Grelot in 1672: “C’est le vestibule superieur

au bout duquel (à une fenestre qui regarde le Couchant) est cette belle pierre transparente que plusieurs voyageurs ont pris pour une Onyce pierre précieuse, mais ce n’est autre chose qu’un marbre fort clair qui se trouve assez communément en Perse.”⁵ Earlier in the seventeenth century, Simeon of Lwow, who visited Constantinople in 1608–9, saw “marvellous works of art. Toward the West there were two flat marble slabs, through which the light shone, and which are called in Turkish *yanar taş*. We saw depicted there scenes from the life of Christ, also the images of the most blessed Virgin Mary, as well as of the holy Apostles, Prophets, Church Fathers and other saints; the infidels had erased and destroyed them and only vestiges of them could be seen.”⁶ Again, the marble windows are in the west, but this time they are recorded as bearing Christian figural decoration. It is probably these windows which were included in the Tradescant album. Indeed, Simeon of Lwow, although in fact an Armenian, may well have been the “Jew” who made these drawings, Lwow having once been a thriving centre of Jewry.

Decorated windows will have been a noteworthy feature of Constantinopolitan architecture, although very little evidence for painted marble windows has as yet come to light. Stained glass windows are known from the City: fragments of figured glass dated by the excavators to the early twelfth century have been found at both Zeyrek Camii (the church of the Pantocrator) and Kariye Camii (the church of the Savior at the Chora).⁷

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¹M. Allan, *The Tradescants, Their Plants, Gardens and Museum 1570–1662* (London, 1964). See, too, A. MacGregor (ed.), *Tradescant’s Rarities. Essays on the Foundation of the Ashmolean Museum 1683, with a Catalogue of the Surviving Early Collections* (Oxford, 1983) (where the drawing discussed here is mentioned at pp. 21 and 355–56).

²Oxford, Bodleian Library, Add. MS B 67 (1638), p. 497 There is an English translation by H. Hager in *Englische Studien*, 10 (1887), 450.

³J. Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantianum: or A Collection of Rarities Preserved at South-Lambeth neer London* (London, 1656), 41.

⁴British Library, Add. MS 22912, fol. 156 (161), quoted by C. Mango, *Materials for the Study of the Mosaics of St. Sophia at Istanbul*, DOS, VIII (Washington, D.C., 1962), 128 (cf. pp. 43 and 48).

⁵G. J. Grelot, *Relation nouvelle d’un voyage de Constantinople* (Paris, 1680), 128 E, quoted by Mango, *op. cit.*, 43.

⁶N. Akinian (ed.), *Des armeniens Simeon aus Polen Reisebeschreibung, Annalen und Kolophone* (Vienna, 1936), 10f., quoted in translation by Mango, *op. cit.*, 121–22.

⁷A. H. S. Megaw, “Notes on recent work of the Byzantine Institute in Istanbul,” *DOP*, 17 (1963), 349–67, color plate opp. p. 333, figs. F–L, and pls. 20–25. David Winfield has kindly drawn my attention to a twelfth-century fresco in the narthex of the church of St. George at Asinou in Cyprus (which he will publish) where in the architectural background there is visible a small church with colored roundels, probably of stained glass, in the cupola. I am, moreover, grateful to S. Ćurčić for referring me to the colored glass windows from the dome of the church of the Virgin at Studenica monastery (post-1183): A. Deroko, *Monumentalna i dekorativna arhitektura u srednjovekovnoj Srbiji*, 2nd ed. (Belgrade, 1962), 64–67, figs. 79, 80, and 82.

The draught of St. George, copied out
of a booke in Mr. Jo: Fredericks (Esq:)
wherem are verily hymned the windows
(as is said) of St. Sophias Church at Constantinople.

